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Intelligence Memorandum

Factions Among the Khmer Insurgents

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
1 March 1973

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

FACTIONS AMONG THE KHMER INSURGENTS

Highlights

1. There are three broad groupings in the Khmer insurgent movement:

- The first group--and the most important--consists of hardcore Khmer Communists. Most of these Communists probably have closer ties to Hanoi than to Peking or Moscow, because of their longer-standing direct relations with the North Vietnamese.
- The second group, the Khmer Rouge, consists of insurgents who opposed Sihanouk before his ouster in 1970 and oppose him still.
- The third group, the Khmer Rumdoh,* is composed of insurgents who support Sihanouk and wish to see the prince restored to power.

2. Most of the ordinary members of the second and third groups above are more leftist than Communist. Hardcore Communists from the first group play an important, behind-the-scenes leadership role in both of the latter two groups, but do not fully control them. All three groups work together militarily and are heavily dependent on the North Vietnamese for military support and material aid.

3. The factionalism within the Khmer insurgent movement is further complicated by a nationalist/Communist split which cuts across pro- and anti-Sihanouk lines. Even in the first group listed

*The Cambodian word rumdoh means "liberation." "Khmer Rumdoh," hence, is the equivalent of "Khmer Liberation" (Movement).

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above, some of the hardcore Khmer Communists almost certainly desire to maintain their independence from Vietnamese or Chinese Communist control.

4. We have no reliable evidence of the existence of a separate "Moscow-oriented" group among the Khmer insurgents.

5. The factionalism within the Khmer insurgent movement adds to the difficulties of achieving a settlement to the Cambodian conflict, because of the uncertainty surrounding just who can speak authoritatively for the insurgents. On the other hand, this factionalism is also a serious weakness for the insurgents--since it raises the possibility that their divisions could be exploited. Under its present leadership, however, the Phnom Penh Government is not likely to be able to take advantage of this weakness in the insurgency.

6. At present, the Khmer insurgents are submerging their political differences in common opposition to the Lon Nol government. Should the fighting stop, these differences would probably emerge in sharper relief.

7. What additional knowledge we have on the Khmer insurgent groupings is presented in the following paragraphs. The U.S. Mission in Phnom Penh [redacted] has

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[redacted] has deliberately adopted a very low posture in Cambodia in recent years for reasons which need not be rehearsed here. Because of this, it should be recognized that we do not have enough information to assess with any precision who controls or influences each group of Khmer insurgents, to evaluate the capabilities and external support of each group, or to estimate the intentions of each group.

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Additional DetailsBackground

8. Starting with a small and ineffectual Cambodian insurgent group, the Vietnamese Communists over the past three years have developed a combat force (estimated to number some 40,000 to 50,000 men) which today holds the military initiative in Cambodia. At the same time they have laid the foundation for an insurgent political structure in sections of every province in the country. The insurgents are in a position to exert some degree of administrative control over approximately 3.5 million of Cambodia's eight million people and over some 70 percent of its territory--much of which is sparsely populated.

9. Responsibility for the basic direction of the insurgency appears to rest in the hands of a shadowy Khmer Communist Party, which may not have begun to play a real role until Sihanouk's ouster in 1970. Fragmentary evidence suggests that the Vietnamese Communists tried unsuccessfully to form a party in the early 1950s. In the late 1950s, they concentrated on providing propaganda and financial support to the leftist Pracheachon (People's) Party in Phnom Penh--a small front group that never attained a wide popular following, and that Sihanouk crippled by jailing most of its leaders in 1962. Currently, hardcore Khmer Communist members probably number several thousand, most of whom are Cambodians trained in North Vietnam since 1954. They have been returning to Cambodia in increasing numbers over the past year to take up positions of authority in the insurgency.

10. Sihanouk and the Khmer Communists claim that the leadership of the over-all insurgent force is in the hands of three officials in Sihanouk's Peking-based "government," who allegedly have been

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in Cambodia guiding the insurgency since the early days of the war. This triumvirate, known in Cambodia as the "three ghosts," consists of "defense minister" Khieu Samphan, "interior minister" Hou Yuon and "information minister" Hu Nim. All are young, French-trained intellectuals, leaders in the leftist or pro-Communist political movement in Phnom Penh during most of the 1960s. They dropped out of sight in 1967 amid widely-circulated rumors that Sihanouk had executed them. To this day they have made no public appearance to confirm their existence and there is no evidence that any of them have been in either Hanoi or Peking since the war began.

The Sihanouk Problem

11. Factionalism represents the insurgency's greatest internal problem. A basic source of factionalism--perhaps the major one--is former chief-of-state Sihanouk and the question of his political future. Aside from its Communist hardcore, the insurgent movement consists of two general groupings, the "Khmer Rouge" and the "Khmer Rumdoh." The "Khmer Rouge" are left-wing nationalists who opposed Sihanouk before his ouster and who in turn were persecuted by him. The "Khmer Rumdoh" are pro-Sihanouk insurgents who hope to see the prince returned to power. A Sihanouk restoration was the rallying cry for the insurgency in its early days and those sympathetic to Sihanouk could still represent a significant portion of the insurgent rank-and-file.

12. Little is known about the relative strength of the pro- and anti-Sihanouk factions, but there seems no doubt about where the Communist hardcore stands. Although they probably appreciate Sihanouk's skills as a propagandist, his ability to attract diplomatic attention and the value of his residual following among the Cambodian peasantry, they harbor strong reservations about his return to Cambodia in any position of real or potential power. An intercepted message of 2 February

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from the Standing Committee of the insurgents' Central Party Committee stated, for example, that "Sihanouk's position has been independent of ours." The message also made it quite clear that the indigenous Communist leadership had rejected Sihanouk's public suggestion that they reciprocate the government's cessation of offensive operations.

The Picture in Peking

13. The Sihanouk complication is not confined to the in-country insurgency. An uneasy marriage of convenience is also reflected in the Peking-based government-in-exile. The Khmer insurgents are ostensibly an arm of Sihanouk's "Royal Government of National Union" and its associated front group, the "National United Front of Kampuchea." As such, they are supposedly under the control of Sihanouk and his immediate entourage in the Peking exile structure. But Khmer Communist interests in Peking--and perhaps Hanoi as well--most likely are represented by Ieng Sary, not Sihanouk. Ieng Sary suddenly appeared in the Chinese capital during the summer of 1971 bearing the title of "special envoy of the interior." Like Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon and Hu Nim, he first came under Communist influence during his student days in France. He, too, incurred Sihanouk's ire for his leftist activities and, in 1963, went into a long period of hiding that ended only with his emergence in Peking.

14. Ieng Sary has stayed close by Sihanouk's side ever since, and the attention he has received from the Chinese and North Vietnamese suggests that he is being groomed for future political stardom in Cambodia. Ieng Sary, for instance, accompanied Sihanouk to Hanoi in early February for consultations with the North Vietnamese and while there met privately with Premier Pham Van Dong. From all accounts, Ieng Sary and his party colleagues in Peking maintain "correct" relations with the deposed prince while doing what they can privately to monitor and control his political activities.

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External Political Ties

15. The Sihanouk question also represents a difficult political problem for the insurgents' principal backers. Both Peking and Hanoi still endorse Sihanouk and his "government" as the sole legitimate Cambodian political authority, but there is good reason to believe that the Chinese stamp of approval is far more enthusiastic. The Chinese would be happy to see Sihanouk restored to power because of their long and close relationship with the prince. The Vietnamese Communists see things differently. The triumphant return of a Sihanouk openly flaunting his relationship with Peking as a guarantee against Vietnamese encroachment would offer Hanoi little reward for its substantial investment in Cambodia.

16. The question of foreign relationships is another basic divisive factor which cuts across pro- and anti-Sihanouk lines and adds to factional complications in insurgent ranks. The relationship between the Khmer insurgents and their North Vietnamese mentors has been close but not always congenial. The Vietnamese have had to contend with a deep-seated Khmer racial animosity which has led to many incidents including numerous cases of armed confrontation between insurgents and Vietnamese Communist units. Despite whatever handle Hanoi has on the top echelon leadership, a considerable amount of anti-Vietnamese feeling must exist within the insurgent rank-and-file and perhaps even within the Khmer Communist Party itself. Thus it seems reasonable to assume that certain elements within the insurgency are equally opposed to the return of a Chinese-backed Sihanouk and to Vietnamese Communist domination of their movement and country. This suggests certain opportunities for a Soviet role, but there is no history of significant Soviet links with the Cambodian left-wing and no hard evidence indicating the existence of a pro-Soviet faction within the insurgent movement. If one did exist, it would be undercut among the insurgents by Moscow's present policy of recognizing the Lon Nol government.

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Phnom Penh's Approach to the Problem

17. Phnom Penh, for obvious reasons, is banking on the existence of some form of authoritative "national-leftist" grouping within the insurgency. If an insurgent leadership opposed to both Sihanouk and Hanoi could be found, the prospect of a negotiated settlement would become more palatable to the Lon Nol government. In this regard, Cambodian First Minister Hang Thun Hak now claims to have made contact with a key insurgent leader after several months of fruitless effort. [redacted] he has received several letters recently--via an intermediary--from Hou Yuon, the insurgency's "minister of interior," and one of the "three ghosts" mentioned earlier. Hak says that Hou Yuon is opposed to a Communist system for Cambodia and is anxious to stop the fighting providing the government demonstrates its sincerity by naming a "trustworthy" negotiating team. Hou Yuon left the impression, however, that other pro-Sihanouk and pro-Hanoi elements of the insurgency did not share his interest in negotiations and supported a prolonged conflict. He evidently also indicated that he put more trust in Moscow than in Peking as an ally which, if true, would be a reversal of his previous political leanings.

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18. The guarded and fragmentary nature of Hak's comments and the unestablished reliability of the intermediary make it difficult to evaluate this story. If Hak's account is substantially correct, it serves to underscore the fact that political factionalism within insurgent ranks is certain to complicate quick or easy settlement of the Cambodian problem. By casting doubt on Hou Yuon's presumed leadership role within the Khmer Communist Party, Hak's story only adds to the confusion surrounding the question of who really leads the insurgency and where the loyalties of those leaders lie. If the channel to Hou Yuon proves real and Lon Nol allows Hak to keep it open, subsequent contacts may throw more light on political complexions within the insurgent movement.

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